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ABSTRACT

Research has shown that an active mentor can facilitate the career development of the neophyte. The hypothesis was tested that the failure of women to sponsor others, i.e., to assume a mentor role, is the logical outcome of situational pressures exerted on all persons who fill, and succeed in, a token role, rather than merely how women act when they become successful. Female subjects (N=62), who had just graduated as members of the first coeducational class at West Point, responded to a 1-hour, unstructured interview. Subjects were asked to recall their interactions with incoming freshmen women at the beginning of their sophomore year. Results showed that the sophomore women failed to offer help to the freshmen women. Findings suggest that, separated by only 1 year at the Academy, the major difference between these two groups was the hard-earned, yet marginal and constantly questioned peer acceptance the sophomore women had won from the dominant male group. Findings also suggest that the "exception that proved the rule" was the all-women athletic teams where freshmen cadets experienced a temporary reprieve from tokenism and competition with mates, and women reported helping other women. The results support the hypothesis that the failure of token women just one step ahead of the newcomer to act as mentors is the result of situational constraints inherent in the role of the double-deviant. (PAS)

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# MENTORS: A DEBT DUE FROM PRESENT TO FUTURE GENERATIONS

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MENTORS: A DEBT DUE FROM PRESENT TO FUTURE GENERATIONS

--George Peabody (1795-1869)

Research has shown that an active mentor can facilitate the career development of the neophyte (Roche, 1979; Young, Mackenzie, & Sherif, 1980). A mentor may be someone who is just one step ahead or who is a well-established professional. In either case, a mentor is someone at work "who took a personal interest in your career and who guided you or sponsored you" (Roche, 1979, p. 15). The purpose of this presentation is to examine a situation where women failed to sponsor other women from two perspectives: person-centered and situation-centered (Riger & Galligan, 1980).

The person-centered approach is exemplified by the "queen bee syndrome" (Staines, Tavris, & Jayaratne, 1974). The successful female executive who allegedly exhibits this syndrome enjoys her special status, quells potential competition, and co-opts membership in the dominant group. This approach assumes that many women who become successful, regardless of the circumstances of their success, naturally will exhibit this syndrome.

In contrast, the situation-centered approach points to the social context, not to individuals' shortcomings, as the root of this failure of women to sponsor others. It will be agrued here that the failure to sponsor others is the logical outcome of situational pressures exerted on all persons who fill, and succeed in, a token role.

The subjects of this project were the 62 women who graduated in 1980 as members of the first co-educational class from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. These women are the successful graduates from the 119 women who entered the Academy in 1976. Just prior to graduation, most (90%) of these women responded to an one-hour, unstructured interview. Included in this interview was a question asking these women to recall their interactions with freshmen women who entered the

Academy at the beginning of the respondents' sophomore year. A random sample of 20 retrospective interviews was analyzed, and it is these that form the backbone of this paper. Evidence from Project Athena, a four-year, longitudinal study of these women, added support for the findings reported here (Vitters, Note 1; Adams, Note 2; Houston, Note 3).

By definition (Kanter, 1977; Laws, 1975), the women at West Point filled a token role. The proportion of women in the entire Corps of Cadets (approximately 8%) defined them as a token group. The entry of women into the military academies had been mandated by Congress in 1976 in spite of the pessimistic predictions offered by military representatives (Stiehm, 1981). Furthermore, the marginal position of women was maintained by Academy policies which established an admissions quota of no more than ten per cent and which were unyielding to change except in those instances where physiological differences between the sexes could be substantiated (Vitters, Note 1).

Sophomore women in the Class of '80 failed to offer their help to the incoming freshmen women. In their exit interviews, all women described their earlier relationship with the new female cadets as distant. One senior woman commented, "In my class, overall, we were all very wary of even approaching the girls. I can honestly say when I was a yearling (sophomore), I don't think I even talked to a woman underclassman. That's how I think a lot of the girls were; it was just nothing we wanted to bother with." In contrast, male cadets' responses to a survey in 1978 indicated that sponsorships among male cadets were flourishing at the Academy at this time (Houston, Note 3).

Why were women not being sponsored? Since institutional policies in fraternization prevented novice cadets from seeking sponsorial relationships with upperclass cadets, we can focus on asking why upperclass women decided not to initiate these relationships.

Kanter (1977) argued that because of the perceptual contrast of tokens with dominants, dominants are uncertain about how to deal with these obviously different, unknown tokens. Two common solutions used by dominants are to isolate and stereotype tokens, encapsulating them into a role based on group differences between tokens and dominants.

A similar process seems to go on with established tokens who exhibit uncertainty about how to deal with token newcomers. Because of the contrast of established tokens with the incoming tokens, potential mentors in the experienced group may, like dominants, resolve this uncertainty by avoiding the fledgling. Exit interviews corroborate this. For example, one senior woman said, "I didn't know how to react initially to the new plebes (freshmen) and that was the case with most yearlings (sophomores). You're scared to talk to them, because you were (recently) just a plebe yourself. So, you kind of stay away from them..."

Separated by only one year at the Academy, the major difference between these two groups became the hard-earned, yet marginal and constantly questioned, peer acceptance the initiated women had won from the dominant group. The sophomore women wanted to do nothing to jeopardize the delicate peer acceptance they always felt hanging in the balance. "Sure they're women too, but it's like when you were a yearling, you didn't want to favor the other women or they'd call it frat (fraternization). You had to be extra careful that you didn't help the women that were coming in." "My class was, I guess, so afraid to give any extra attention to the women, because we were afraid that we would be harassed too, that we just didn't." Data from a survey given to the women in the pioneering class upon their graduation showed that they never resolved their fears that they would be unaccepted by their peers as cadets.

The exception that may prove the rule is in the all-women athletic teams where cadets experienced a temporary reprieve from tokenism and competition with dominants. Here women did report helping other women. As one senior explained,

there was no "big comradery" among women, but on teams she helped, "not as a woman...but as a team member and as their captain." When the situation encouraged cooperation and sponsorships, cadet women responded, not as queen bees, but as mentors.

The failure of token women just one-step ahead of the newcomer to act as mentors has been shown to be the result of situational constraints inherent in the role of the double-deviant. The marginal status of tokens within a competitive context contributed to lingering doubts about peer acceptance, a reluctance to give up the "specialness" of visibility, a preoccupation with the performance pressures of tokenism, and role encapsulation into a feminine role that precludes the masculine role of powerful team player. The analysis presented here argues for structural-organizational changes, rather than changes directed at altering or accommodating individuals to an existent system, as the first step in admitting hitherto excluded groups to an exclusive organization.

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